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## THE BURNING OF ROME UNDER NERO

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THE burning of Rome under Nero has, in recent years, given rise to so many researches that it might appear rather useless to return to the subject. But modern scholars differ very widely in regard to one of the principal questions, namely the responsibility for the tremendous catastrophe.

As the students of Roman history remember, an Italian scholar, Professor Pascal of Milan, touched on this question in a pamphlet published in 1900. In this pamphlet, written in a rather concise but interesting manner, Professor Pascal attempts to prove that the authors of the fire were really the Christians of Rome. He describes the early Christian community at Rome as very large, composed in great part of desperate fanatics, who by their subversive ideas were of necessity led to the "propaganda of acts"; furthermore, he supposes that the Christians had numerous proselytes among the praetorians and the fire-police of Rome. So, he concludes, a band of energetic conspirators conceived the idea of purifying the wretched capital of the Roman Empire by setting it on fire, anticipating, with the burning of Rome, the last days of the world.

The criticism of Professor Pascal's pamphlet took, in almost every case, the form of a defence of the Christians of Rome. The arguments on this side were collected in a most complete manner by Dr. A. Profumo, whose book, published in 1905, treats in more than 700 pages all the questions relating to the literary and monumental evidence of the great catastrophe. Dr. Profumo comes to a conclusion quite opposite to that of Pascal: he attributes the sole responsibility for the fire to the Emperor Nero. The emperor, according to him, had conceived the plan of improving the worst of the old quarters of Rome, of whose aspect and sanitary condition he disapproved, by de-

stroying them by fire. He had chosen for this purpose the time of midsummer, when the *scirocco* or *ponentino* blows over the city ; this wind would drive the fire from the south corner of the Palatine hill, where at the emperor's order the fire was kindled in the imperial *horrea*, down to the "Valle Labicana," between the Caelian and the Esquiline, where a network of wretched old lanes existed, and where Nero desired to extend his Golden House.

I do not intend to recapitulate the objections which could be made to both these hypotheses : for example, against that of Professor Pascal it could be said that the primitive community of Christians in Rome was surely not so large as he thinks ; that the revolutionary ideas of its members have been greatly exaggerated, and that the supposed propagation of Christianity among the praetorians is based on an erroneous translation : St. Paul's words *ἐν τῷ πραιτωρίῳ* (*Philipp.* I, 13) do not signify "in the Praetorian Camp," as it is supposed, but "in the judge's house" or "in the residence (of the emperor)" (Momm-*sen, Röm. Staatsrecht*, II<sup>3</sup>, p. 807, n. 2). These objections are set forth for the most part in Dr. Profumo's book, which, on the other hand, invites criticisms of a different kind. The idea of deliberately planning such an enormous conflagration, and of actually calculating the direction in which the fire must spread, appears too fantastic even for Nero ; to start the fire in the immediate neighborhood of the imperial palace with the intention of destroying quarters nearly half a mile distant is still more fantastic. Any little unsuspected incident might upset the plan, and divert the fire from the course intended ; and in fact, what really took place did not correspond at all to the design as conceived by Profumo and represented on his plan (*Tav.* 2).

Instead of recapitulating these and other objections, I want to call attention to a simple date, which has not been observed as yet by any of the numerous writers about Nero's fire, but which seems to me of some importance. The conflagration began on the 19th, or perhaps more exactly in the night between the 18th and the 19th of July, 64 A.D., as we learn from the contemporary testimony of Tacitus. Now, every astronomical calendar tells us that in July, 64 A.D., it was full moon

on the 17th, exactly one day before the outbreak of the fire.<sup>1</sup> Every one who has had occasion to see the full moon on a Roman summer night will remember that the brightness of the light and the transparency of the air make such nights almost like day. The inhabitants of modern Rome—and those of ancient Rome would not have done otherwise—prefer in these *dies caniculares* to stay awake a great part of the night and to rest during the day. If a band of conspirators, or of Nero's emissaries, planned to set the town on fire, they surely should have done so to be successful a fortnight before or after the 17th of July, but there could not be chosen a less convenient time than this to carry out a plot requiring the darkness and the stillness of the night.

I conclude, therefore, that the outbreak of the fire was really due to accident. It may be that some of the Christian party fell under suspicion because of their behavior during and after the conflagration. Seeing the terrible catastrophe which was happening to the capital of the world, it was very easy to think that this was the beginning of the last judgment, which they were expecting in the very near future. The fire appeared to have come upon the wretched town providentially, so that it might be regarded as wrong to interfere with its progress. It may be that among those who menaced the firemen (*minis restringere prohibentes*, Tacitus, *Ann.* XV, 38) were some zealous Christians. And when, after the extinction of the fire, Nero attempted to regain the favor of the gods by sacrifices and ceremonies, the Christians naturally abstained from participating in the sacrifices to Vulcan and Juno and in the processions to the temples of the Olympic gods. Their insensibility to the general feeling could easily promote the suspicion that they had been the real authors of the great conflagration.

On the other hand, there was abundant reason for attributing the whole responsibility to Nero. The Emperor, in the beginning, not at all averse to the destruction of the wretched plebe-

<sup>1</sup> Professor E. Millosevich, Director of the Royal Observatory of the Collegio Romano, kindly gave me the following information: "The exact time of the full moon of July, 64 A.D., was eight minutes past two of the morning of the 17th (central Roman time). The moon rose at Rome on the 16th of July at two minutes past seven P.M. and set the following morning at four minutes past four."

ian quarters, probably gave orders to move slowly in the work of extinguishing the fire. It may be that the magnificent view of the conflagration made him break out into admiring words, and aroused in his mind the remembrance of the burning of Ilium. These and other imprudent expressions were naturally noted and were sufficient to forge the material for the accusations we find suggested in the writings of Tacitus and Suetonius, and definitely expressed in Dio Cassius and Xiphili-  
nus. To the human mind, as J. G. Hamann says, it is common to prefer the probable to the true.

CH. HÜLSEN.

ROME,  
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